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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000366

SENSITIVE  
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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/23/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SL](#)  
SUBJECT: RUMORS OF CABINET CHANGES ABOUND IN SIERRA LEONE

REF: A. FREETOWN 300  
[1](#)B. FREETOWN 336

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: While whispers of a possible cabinet reshuffle have been heard in Sierra Leone for several months, the whispers have escalated into a roar recently in numerous local press reports. While Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) representatives are officially denying imminent changes in the Cabinet, this is the logical time for the President to take action for a variety of reasons. A major overhaul at the Cabinet-level would potentially shore-up Koroma's public support, respond to criticism of ministries that appear to be underperforming, and demonstrate to the international community that the government is committed to accountability and fighting corruption. The July 13 seizure of a cocaine-laden plane has also called into question the efficacy of various officials. There is a strong possibility that changes will be made prior to the anniversary of Koroma's inauguration as President in November 2008. END SUMMARY.

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MINISTERIAL REVIEW  
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[1](#)2. (C) While GoSL officials deny press reports that President Koroma intends to reconfigure his Cabinet, rumors of this eventuality have circulated for a number of months. Koroma's development of a performance appraisal system, which included each minister signing contracts agreeing to a performance review every six months, demonstrated an obvious interest and commitment to accountability. The review period is fast-approaching, which the ministers were reminded of during a meeting with President Koroma on July 10. This meeting provided a venue for the President to remind his Cabinet that, with the local elections behind them, attention will again concentrate on the actions and inactions of the federal government. The wide reporting of this meeting indicates that the President also used it as a means to send a clear signal to the public that he will not hesitate from removing ineffective ministers from their positions.

[1](#)3. (C) That some of the Ministers were chosen for political reasons, as opposed to proven sectoral competency, is widely known. A highly-placed embassy source told Poloff earlier this year that the President considers some of the ministers as forced upon him, and that the review process will give him an acceptable means of removing those that do not share his "vision" without losing considerable political capital. This is also a means to remove ministers whose reputations are clouded by suspicions of corruption. On July 13, the landing of a plane under the cover of darkness and filled with cocaine led not only to immediate arrests of eight suspects, but also to implications of complicity involving the Minister of Transportation, among others (reftel B).

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MAINTAINING A POSITIVE PUBLIC IMAGE  
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14. (C) Beyond an opportunity to create a Cabinet more of his choosing, the President is also likely trying to curry favor with the public. Though Koroma has largely enjoyed strong support since he came to power, he and his advisors are aware that he was elected on a platform of dynamism. Promises to rectify past governance problems, particularly in the area of corruption, as well as to move the country into a period of prosperous development through increased investment in business and growth enterprises are considered key to Koroma's victory. The realities of inheriting a government bankrupt of funds, infrastructure, and human capacity, however, has made it difficult for the President to make considerable strides in creating change that is universally tangible to Sierra Leoneans. While supplying power to Freetown generated tremendous good will, it represents one small victory in the face of significant challenges. In particular, escalating prices of commodities created financial and food insecurity across the country, and Sierra Leoneans, while patient with the new government, are becoming increasingly vocal about the hardships they face. In addition, the recent cocaine bust, the largest in the country's history, is raising questions of corruption at some of the highest levels of government. Such a visible display of criminality and possible corruption could create even more skepticism amongst Sierra Leoneans that the Koroma administration is no more committed to changing established bad practices than the previous government was.

FREETOWN 00000366 002 OF 002

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DEFLECTING NEGATIVE ATTENTION  
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15. (C) While removing ineffective ministers is a logical step for the President from the standpoint of improving governance, any movement could also be perceived as a potential diversionary tactic from other issues. The local elections, though occurring with relatively few irregularities, were not without controversy (reftel A). Allegations of misconduct and intimidation were levied at the APC party in general, and the Vice President in particular. Coupling this with the recent cocaine bust, there is an appearance that Sierra Leone cannot escape the thuggery and crime that has plagued its history. Sweeping changes in the cabinet presents an opportunity to distract the public from the allegations against the Vice President. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate a tough stance on crime. President Koroma's highly-touted anti-corruption legislation, which strengthens the powers of the Anti-Corruption Commission and its Commissioner, also send a clear signal of firmness to the public.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) As the completion of Koroma's first year in office draws nearer, the "honeymoon" period his administration has thus far enjoyed is also nearing an end. Shifting the Cabinet composition to increase its effectiveness is one means of demonstrating to the people his commitment to anti-corruption efforts, and ensuring that their needs are well met. Such a move would buy the GoSL more time and patience to prove to the citizens that the changes promised during the Presidential elections are happening. It is also an opportunity to move quickly past recent events, including the local elections and the cocaine bust. Both compromise the credibility of the APC government's image as promoters of peace, good governance, and rule of law. While the Cabinet changes are currently rumor, there are strong indications

from highly-placed sources that changes (for the better, one predicts) will be made in the next few months. END COMMENT.  
PERRY